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Guns in the cockpit?

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WAS THAT really U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., at a news conference with gun-rights advocate U.S. Sen. Bob Smith, R-N.H. on Wednesday? Yes, that was her, standing up for legislation to allow airline pilots to pack guns in the cockpit.

There was no surer sign that the measure, approved by the House this week, was gaining an irresistible momentum. "I have decided that until I am satisfied with the number of air marshals on commercial flights, this bill is a necessity -- indeed it is a matter of life and death," Boxer said. Earlier, U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., endorsed the concept of arming pilots.

The question is, will guns in the cockpit actually enhance or diminish the safety of commercial aviation? During the House debate, Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, raised sensible questions about whether errant gunshots could depressurize the cabin or disable a plane's computer system.

In our view, it makes far more sense to install safeguards that would foil a hijacking before a terrorist could reach the cockpit: better screening procedures, more secure cockpit doors and the deployment of more plainclothes air marshals with the sole duty of protecting the plane.

A pilot's job is to stay alert, sober and singularly focused on the all- critical task of keeping the plane in the air.

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